The Only Living Boy in Omaha

by

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ABSTRACT

The poems in The Only Living Boy in Omaha tell the story of Simon, who, after his mother dies giving birth to him, is raised on passenger trains by his father, a conductor. Set in the 1940s and '50s, the book follows Simon as he travels across the American West, back and forth between California and his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. Along the way, Simon gets to know other passengers, falls in love with radio and California's past, befriends an inventor, and discovers the story of his miracle birth. Blending lyric and narrative, history and fable, these poems revisit a time when passenger trains were popular, and explore the unique childhood that took place there.

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During the worst heat wave the country had ever seen,
a month of temperatures that destroyed corn,
drove cows to the lake,
& made pocket change too hot to touch,
he was delivered.

On that day:
babies born downtown did not last long enough to be slapped,
thumb-sized lungs folding like chairs
as mothers choked their own final breaths
in a blackout that killed back-up generators,
sent nurses scrambling to ventilate patients by hand,
the scattering glows of candles & flashlights
the only visible things.

He took one breath before he died—
11:42 am—
fell limp as a rag in the doctor's hands
which tried but could not bring him back.
His father came in to say goodbye,
paced the room & cradled the boy
close to the throbbing in his own chest,
seven pounds, six ounces that never felt heavier.

Then a hand-clench, leg kick, & cry
like snapping out of a darker womb,
he opened his eyes—
11:59 am.

The next day's paper packed with news of the miracle birth:
one baby average in height, weight,
could not shed a tear,
the only one to survive the day.

His father named him Simon.

His father stared for days through spotless glass
& watched the only incubator filled.
The doctors let him stay. He never asked
for food; he never drank & took no pills.
He signed the birth certificate & kept
it clenched—he could not put the thought away.
In flocks reporters smoked their cigarettes
& waited for the boy like birds of prey.
The lobby lit with camera flash when he
was brought into the room. His father fought
the crowd & hailed a cab, would not agree
to answer questions. Breaking down, he thought
of her & sunk into the checkered dome.
He only wanted Simon home, just home.

Before running passenger trains out West
& back to Nebraska,
Simon's father was the youngest conductor
at the Henry Doorly Zoo,
his train drawing figure eights
on a narrow gauge two mile track,
spitting out clouds purely for effect,
chugging through constructed landscapes,
savannah, grassland,
arctic, jungle,
pointing out peacocks & prairie dogs
& how to tell the difference
between African elephants & their Asian cousins,
the trick all in the ears:
when open they resemble the continent of origin.
Then he'd blow the six-chime whistle
like the toy on sale in the gift shop.
Whistle like a bell
triggering his wonder
about the logo on the side of the train.

Do the striped cats in cages
see themselves in the smiling tiger
on the red & blue shield?

The problem with tigers—
every one of them—
is they're all too stubborn
to reveal such thoughts.

Every time the tigers ate,
Simon's father stopped the tour,
studied their faces for recognition.

Ten pounds of horse meat dropped for each cat,
the visitors watching every easy bite.

Someone always laughed
when one tiger finished
& stretched out to sleep
on a sun-covered rock.

"What a life," they'd say,

imposing the logo's grin on each one,
ignorant of instinct, the need to run
the length of a plain,
to spring on something in midstride,
to sink that smile into struggling flesh.

In his first year at the new job,
each train Simon's father ran
left & arrived on time.
It is the way of conductors to honor precision,
so they engraved a nickname on a plaque,
surprised him with a banquet,
from that day forward called him & the train "Old Reliable—"
as if they shared parts.

On his first day he ran a train to California,
picking up speed out of Grand Junction, Colorado,
where the snow on the mountains looked like the powder
covering his donut, the breakfast he barely touched,
so excited to have covered a distance close to one hundred miles
in the block of an hour, as if the length left to travel were endless,
two thousand miles on a standard gauge track
that would not loop around & cross over itself.

He saw each station replaced with the next,
the way the diesel engine slowly eclipsed steam—
Green River, Utah, into Elko, Nevada,
staying awake for forty five-hours,
no wildlife to speak of,
only the air in front of him splitting in two
as he cleaved through it.

Shortly after his birth,
Simon started going to work with his father,
spending his childhood in motion
staring out the windows at clouds,
watching them jockey for position,
shift their shapes
like spilt honey on glass,
imagining his own face
in their approximate outlines.

He watched the way men made ties stay on their necks,
the different motions women used to put on scarves,
taught himself how to tie a variety of knots on a red string of yarn
that a mouse-faced woman left coiled on her seat.

When he learned how to ask questions,
he began pacing the aisles
car to car, counting people,
listening to them spill the details of their lives—
where they were going, why they were leaving.
Sacramento. Business.
Salt Lake City. A bad divorce.

Sometimes Old Reliable
would let Simon throw the switch,
have him pull the heavy, black lever
to change the track
nearly two miles away.
Like the convergence of adjoining fires,
something strong kept Simon from blinking,
peeled eyes staring straight
as if he could see the switch from so far back,
as if a truth he was after
lay somewhere ahead.

They only wanted to come home unharmed:
those waving soldiers leaving for the war.
& in those years they packed the train, were charmed
by pretty depot girls who smiled & swore
they'd write, then disappeared into the smoke.
The train would always stop in Royal Gorge,
& at the bottom of the canyon rock
the soldiers stretched & stared, could not ignore
a thousand feet, the bridge above, the sound
of rapids surging by—how small they felt
against it all. When Simon talked he found
their eyes would drop away as if they held
some heavy weight, something they could not bear.
He never asked them why they looked so scared.

A train is never going so fast that you cannot see its parts,
but it is easy to miss the faces glaring from windows.

*

If Simon was walking inside the moving train
& a man in a blue three button suit
outside the train
on the ground was watching,
Simon's speed relative to the man
would be the sum of his speed
relative to the train
& the train's speed
relative to the man.

*

If Simon were to drop a white ball
marked with a smiling tiger
to the ground of that very train,
to all passengers watching the ball
it would appear to travel straight down
as if he were standing
on stationary ground.

To the man outside standing on the platform,
the ball would appear to curve back
opposite the train's direction.

*

This is all assuming
the man in the blue three button suit
is even looking through the train's window
as it speeds past him. He could be watching
a fox tear the feathers from a peahen
or staring at the laces on his untied shoe.

*

Waiters dressed in black & white
pushing meal carts up the aisle
opposite the train's motion
will appear to people
both inside & outside the train
to be moving in both directions
at the same time.

*

Most passenger trains derail
at speeds in excess
of a hundred miles per hour.

If this train were to derail
the man in the blue three button suit
would call for help,
leap from the platform & run to the scene.
The fox would turn his head
but only for a moment,
not long enough
for the injured peahen to limp away.

A train has six hundred eleven moving parts.

A person has anywhere from two hundred six
to three hundred sixty.

(These figures are not exact.)

If you were to swap the wheels from a train
for the legs of a person,
neither would work properly.

If you were to swap the whistle from a train
for a person's larynx,
they would not be able to tell anyone.
When they opened their mouths
people would turn to look for the train,
but the train would be somewhere far in the distance,
sounding like a person talking to himself.

If you were to take fourteen parts from a person
& add them to a boxcar,
the train would be slower
& the person would collapse.

There is no situation that works
favorably for both of them.

A clothespin attached to an oriole's tail
is made up of two parts.

On a day when the sky turned charcoal,
Simon found a man sitting alone,
sketchbook in lap, his pencil twitching
like he owned the last of the world's lead,
drawing a giant balloon
strung around the edges of a wicker basket.

"What is that, Mister?" Simon asked.

"Sit down," he was told.
The man shared his plans for a new invention,
one that would delight everyone,
Ottawa to India,
a flying balloon
sending passengers to the views they dream of
when riding on the ground. He showed Simon

his blueprints, the intricacies,
the double lap seam:
two fabrics folded at a common edge,
sewn into an envelope,
a teardrop topped with a crown metal ring.

Gas mixed with air, a flame
in the mouth & the balloon lifts off.

Then a shadow on the page,
another passenger laughing:

"You fool! These balloons
have existed for hundreds of years,"
& again that laugh
hovering over the seat.

Simon turned to the window,
imagined himself on a swelling balloon,
the train lifting off the ground,
momentum reversed—
up & down,
not left & right.

In the reflection the man stayed silent,
pushing his pencil hard at the paper,
each line growing darker,

darker still.

Simon went to bed
head full of balloons,
dreaming bright primaries
while moonlight peered through
a hole in the blinds of his sleeping car
like a peeping Tom.

He was floating away
from an ugly captor,
busting up clouds, a fist in a pillow.
With the turn of his head
he was in another sky,
breaking every record for flying balloons
starting with altitude, hanging
70,000 feet above Bombay,
sucking oxygen through a heavy mask,
nothing on the ground visible.
On his knees
peeking over the edge,
thinking he'd blown off course,
he gazed down at a window of ice,
a mirror of sky reflecting
sky reflecting sky,
Simon clutching the edge of the gondola,
luck's swaying phantom.

He hovered in a red balloon,
watched an entire day turn over,
morning air like cotton
& a slight foaming the only sound,
seeing so far ahead
he swore he could make out
traces of the balloon's backside.
The descent was the crawling out of a dream,
vision gone blurry with different light
leaking in, & when back on the ground
the sinking feeling of being awake,
a steady whirring behind his left ear.

Simon learned to read
while the train ran steady,
his father helping him
sound out syllables in the train's manual,
explaining the silent "s" in *chassis*.

From brochures picked up at every station,
Simon studied the amusements west of Omaha,
stumbled over the Old West Museum so many times
the words "souvenir" & "wheelchair accessible"
rolled off his tongue as easy as a breath.

By counting people on the train he learned to add,
learned to subtract by watching them leave.
The number of shoes taught him how to multiply:
75 people meant 150 shoes
& if people had four feet, the number 300.
Doing it backwards he figured out division.

Geography came easy, looking out the windows.

Everything else he picked up from stories
lonely passengers told him, in the newspapers
they left behind. A little bit of science
from a man drawing balloons,
baseball in the always-abandoned *World-Herald*.

Simon learned the most from his 10th birthday present,
the radio he never turned off.

When he first heard the noises
coming through the box
he stayed up all night
twisting the dials, looking for
the source of the shifting sounds.

He spent most days alone in his sleeping car
listening to whatever came on
before it drifted out of range,
soon hunting for a hint of the phrase:

In that wonderful kingdom at the bottom of the sea,

but so often falling asleep to static,

the voices behind trying to break through.

RADIO GHOSTS

Underneath frequencies of visible light,
the ghost waves of radio
pass through the broadcast vacuum,

phantom crooning leaking through static.

They play in rows of forbidden lobbies,
cast off musicians & canceled programs,
their oscillating voice fields,

black notes & dead scripts,

each song a pulse, a signal transmission
pushing the dial,
a need to break through.

Simon seeks them out between major numbers,

turns the knob ever so slightly,
ear to speaker,
hears the lost voices

buried in snow,

the plink of a piano key,
the buzz of their brass,
their songs familiar.

Simon first heard it on a station in Utah,
a program called Sweet Land of Liberty
telling each state's story, one per hour.

Too often the signal would fade,
leaving him to wonder
about dust in Oklahoma, a fire in Chicago.

One night he was drifting at the edge of the world—
the coast he came to know as rest—
when, like two slow-moving clouds, the words "gold rush"
came through the speaker, hung in the air.

He turned up the volume,
clung to each word
as if they were maps
to his very own fortune,

like the man who found pieces of shining metal
stuck in the tailrace of a waterwheel at Sutter's Mill,
a discovery that spread like a flame among dry branches,
setting off a race for a share of the promise.

Any news of gold & camps would spring to life
overnight, all with saloons,
gambling houses & storied names:

Rough & Ready.
Grizzly Canyon.
Hangtown.

Simon closed his eyes again
& was there with a pick axe
earning six years' salary in six months' time,
working alongside those men
panning riverbeds & streams,

part of something special,
part of something at all.

JOHN SUTTER, 1848

He tried to keep the whole thing a secret,
but gold doesn't stay a secret.

In '49, everyone came.
His own workers left for their share of the luck.
Squatters took his land, stole his crops & slaughtered his cattle.

For days he watched each drip
fall from his waterwheel.

Then he left instead of starving.

Against a red sun,
black gold gushing one hundred feet in the air.

One thousand barrels every day
turned Signal Hill into a forest of derricks,
so many that their legs intertwined.

In some places oil seeped from the ground.

It had come from underneath layers of shale,
sandstone, inside porous rock
like fluid suspended in a lump of sugar.

Simon listened & struggled:

How could so much have been hidden underneath one place?

How did they even know what to look for?

What made them notice?

Is it out here somewhere?

Should I be checking the ground after rain?

He woke his father from a dream about the ocean
to ask him if there was anything left,
gold or oil.

"By now it's probably all gone."

Simon said: "But I bet there's something else."

On a California beach, his father gave him a plastic shovel.

As he drove it into the white sand
he heard the sound of voices just like his own.

Simon looked down the beach & saw people his size,
their edges turning into fog.

He kept his distance,
watched & imitated each of their movements:

let a fistful of sand spill through his fingers,
held a shell up to his ear.

He didn't know what he was listening for.

As the water rose to his knees,
he held his palm against the surface,
tasted it & spit.

Gulls dove into the water.

When the children came over to Simon
he told them the stories from the radio,
had them clawing fast at the sand,
looking for traces of black or metal,
screaming their lungs out at anything gleaming.

Under the shade of a lunging palm tree,
Old Reliable stared at the ocean,
thinking about how the tracks always ended
but out there he could go forever,
never having to turn back.

Thinking, beyond the fog
she was waiting for him.

When winter throws its snow
on Colorado, the train is a rolling white cloud.

When it speeds through its next stop
people on the platform curse visible breaths,
check their watches.

Everyone inside except for the sleepers
knows something is wrong.

Simon snores at the late afternoon,
his radio thinning in weather,

then awakes as the passengers' patience drops,
confusion spreading from car to car

as the train keeps cutting the snow in half.

Simon walks to the front & finds
Old Reliable asleep on the floor.
He shakes him once,

nothing happens. He shakes him
again— the snow is falling,

the train keeps plowing ahead.

He was buried in the plot
next to his wife—the earth tossed—
still in uniform, the first time
Simon saw his parents together.

As the wind cried
like a forgotten stove kettle
Simon looked at "uncle" Paul,
the only conductor to make it back,

the man Old Reliable trusted
with Simon. The rest were scattered
outside of Nebraska like distant capitals,
honoring their fallen by hitting arrival times.

The sky was white with circumstance
& Simon tried to look for a pattern
in the way the clouds were shaping themselves.

Walking out of the cemetery,
Simon wiped his nose with his glove,
watched a white-winged bird
shake snow dust from a branch & move
from one stripped tree to another.

He thought about what the priest had said
& imagined his father on a train in the sky.

Then Simon started crying.
He asked Paul, "What happens now?"
& the bird flew back into the other tree.

At the railroad museum in Council Bluffs, Iowa
a room was named for Old Reliable, filled
with photos of him & the train all over America.

They called it *A Conductor's Life*,
displayed it across from the Lincoln collection,
the three large rooms that Simon wandered
in awe of how the tracks he grew up on
started as nothing but an idea scribbled
on a paper scrap inside Lincoln's hat.

When no one was looking, Simon touched Lincoln's chair,
careful not to set it rocking, then looked long
at the president's face made only from bottle caps.

The rest of the museum felt like home,
models of trains & places he'd been
as if someone had shrunk his past.

Pictures in his father's exhibit—
the depots he'd seen hundreds of times,
landscapes he could draw from memory.

But one out of the dozens made him stop.
In it he was standing next to a train,
no taller than the wheels, his father
crouching with a hand on his shoulder,
the other arm stretched
pointing out to the plain,
as if to say

all this is ours.

A CONDUCTOR'S LIFE

From a white mountain in Riverside, Utah,
the train is a yellow dot in the distance,
a powdered flying bee.

~

At Tehachapi Loop,
Old Reliable is the head of a snake
coiled around California.

~

Simon & his father count Tucson's stars,
move into a new year.

~

In Laredo he shields the sun
left-handed, squints toward Mexico &
has a vision.

~

Right hand clutching his watch,
eyes fixed on its face,
he sticks out in the depot crowd,

red hint of a handkerchief in his shirt pocket.

~

Headlights chip away
at a morning fog
like a voice
trying to break through radio.
~

Panorama of a Nebraska plain—
this one he took himself,
unable to guess the silo's distance.

~

Through a small window
in the dining car door,

a passenger's camera captures
him fixing Simon a meal.

~

He leans out the window,
center of the frame,
makes a triangle with bell & headlight,

Oregon's green obscured dark gray.
~

In between the highway
& Klamath Lake,
the train speeds toward cars,
its reflection smudged
across the surface. . .

~

The sun sets fat on Bakersfield,
turns the sky a bloody orange,
yellows the clouds.

A trio of headlights asterisk
the face of the train
as it charges into night
on wet neon rails.

~

Two trains meet on parallel tracks
in North Platte, Nebraska.

Sparrow hawks watch
from a telephone wire.

~

Hugging the edge of Feather River Canyon,
a young Old Reliable sinks
his teeth into his bottom lip.

The train looks painted onto the cliff.

~

A beam of light shoots
out of a tunnel, illuminates
a blinded bear.

~

Train barreling west,
storm collecting itself.

~

Crossing the Great Salt Lake,
Old Reliable emerges
from the blue mirage.

~

Pebble, Idaho:

Running next to the Lincoln Highway,
the train made small by a hill
of canyon maples.

~

Near Devil's Slide, the brush
reddens to the color of the rocks.

~

With a fist full of passengers' tickets,
he leans against the wall
in the observation car.

~

On the steps of the train
at the Omaha depot,

either just arriving home,
or just about to leave.

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LINCOLN AT THE DEPOT

Standing on the platform,
his eyes burned circles in the air in front of him
as if he were searching for the orchard ghosts
from behind the Soldier's Home.

A few steps away,
an old Union general.
The war had left him drunk, syphilitic.

Both men stared at the stockyard
beyond the tracks
where a bull was pushing a cow
against the fence,
her face dripping flies.

A train went by like a curtain
across the farthest track.

Neither man looked away.
The heat drew sweat like a sickness.

When another went by,
the general heard a single gunshot,
turned toward Lincoln,
saw his face veiled in flies.

Simon & his father once sat on a bench
in Kenefick Park on a rare day off,
tossing scraps of bread to birds, watching them
peck & claw at the pieces, the hunger
apparent in their black, beady eyes.

"Let's count them & see if we get the same number,"
his father said.

"One. Two. Three," Simon started.

"No no. Count them in your head.
Then I can't hear you."

So Simon counted birds without speaking,
discovered that he could make words
without moving his mouth.

He lost track at nine, started over
with two fighting for a piece of crust.

Old Reliable said, "I count eleven.
How many did you get?"

Simon didn't know what to say
when one bird flew into a nearby tree.

How easy for them, Old Reliable thought.

They sat there all afternoon,
tearing the loaf until the bag was empty,
until Simon fell asleep on his father's shoulder:

the soft static of his open-mouthed breathing,
the faint rush of the nearby river &
Old Reliable—comfortably alone
with the sounds of all that was moving.

Spring continued to unpack Omaha.

Simon moved in with Uncle Paul,
explored streets that held the shady edges
of his memory.

He walked the Missouri River Bridge,
avoided a truck heading for the stockyards,
kicked little stones off into water.

On the other side
he looked back at the distance,
saw the truck shrink into downtown,

put his hands in his pockets
& followed the breeze
blowing toward the rail yard.

There he was lost
in rows & sounds
of muscle, machine, labor.

He wandered out to the edge
of the yard, where cars
were sparse, older, abandoned,

found one separated
from the others, threw a rock
at its rusty side & felt reverberations.

Inside the hollow car
a single row of seats
was all that was left.

Simon stood in the middle
where the light cut into shadow,
looked outside, vision tunneled.

Each day the car became more
his own, finished with junk he found
scattered outside: a table

for his radio, blankets
to cover the row of seats
& a birdcage for character.

He left Paul's in the mornings
with a bagged lunch & stack
of old magazines, read aloud

in the car just for echo,
watched the men work
from a nearby hillside

& always made it back
before supper, before dark,
where most nights he'd lie & stare

through the window, the grind of a train
a hundred miles off
keeping him awake.

One afternoon, Simon fell asleep inside the car,
woke up blind

to the faint sound of hammer
on metal. Outside,

he saw a steady light
burning in the distance,
a single hole punched in the darkness.

Above, a thickening fog
shaded the stars.

He walked toward the light,
could hear electricity
running through the phone wires,

but the deeper he moved into the yard,
the light did not feel any closer.

Then the sound of an oncoming train,
louder & louder until passing through his chest,
putting him on the ground.

The light began to flicker, disappeared
& Simon was left in the thick of it,
invisible.

Light drops of rain woke
Simon in the morning,

back knotted from leaning
all night against
the side of a car.

Too early for workers
but not for the birds
who poked & clawed
at the ground for food.

Simon walked the empty spaces,
his eyes stuck on dark clouds
speeding his way.

He could see the rain was heavier ahead,
splitting the sky in half.

As it started to pour
he made it back,
found a man inside,
well-dressed & well-bearded,
looking at the birdcage
like he wanted to steal it.

He introduced himself as "Jerzy,"
owner of a general store uptown,
part-time inventor looking for scrap metal.

Simon told him his story,
all the way up to the light he saw the night before,
asked if he could see the inventions
& agreed to give up the birdcage.

Simon wrapped himself
in a blanket & the two of them
sat there waiting out the rain,
listening to drops battering the roof.

THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1881

The Missouri had risen thirty-five feet,
killed several people & destroyed the lowlands.
When word came down from South Dakota,
the railroads moved their rolling stock to higher ground
& Omaha panicked. Upstream cracked,
crashed the still-solid part of the river, the pieces
stacking into a dam, spreading water
five miles wide, the water yellow
with clay & cornfield debris, dotted with houses—
those tiny islands. The city nearly submerged,
families huddled on their roofs,
livestock floated by, unbearable animal sounds
drowned by the rush. The reverend rowed
a small skiff over the sunken UP coal yard,
stopped to rest his burning arms
& then across the lumber yards, offered
prayers of safe deliverance up & down
9th street, praying for his shadow in the water.
That shadow disappeared, the darkness
came with cold, no moon. Those long hours
all was still & even with hot columns of breath
pouring out of them into the black, some thought
they were already dead, that death was a roof
on the verge of sinking into a deeper, darker, nothing.
When the ice dam broke the water attacked downstream towns
with the pieces of Omaha it had collected:
overwhelming sheets of ice crumbling houses schools
hotels people clinging to anything floating the church bell
ringing as the spire cracked & keeled
the river swallowed what the ice collapsed.
When it was over it wasn't over,
the water receding slowly revealed the empty space.
Somewhere a horse stuck in a tree,
upside down with knees cracked,
wrapped around a mess of branches,
two legs pointing to the sky.

After the rain, Simon followed Jerzy over the bridge,
helped him push puddles off the general store awning
with the edge of a broom. Inside,

a flickering incandescence cast a soft yellow
onto the room, the dust on the shelves.

Jerzy led Simon to the back of the store
through a beaded curtain to the invention room,
cluttered wall to wall,
enough junk to fill five train cars:

buckets & tires, ten sizes of tweezers,
piano keys, a crate of new lightbulbs,
boxes of scrap metal, animal furs,
a wheelbarrow tub & a duck head umbrella handle,
loose sheets of paper with drawings of machines.

Then there were the jars
lining the shelves from ceiling to floor,
different tints of blues & greens,
clear ones with powders
labeled with words Simon had not seen before:

Amber Clove & Camphor Drops,
Carum, Junip, Jalap,
Sulph. Catawba, Canthirides,
Belladonna, Alum,

jars full of corks,
cotton balls, batteries, & dominoes.

Through another door into an open yard,
Simon saw a porcelain tub,
tall thick pipe sticking up from the bottom,
a wooden crank handle attached to the side.

"Here is my artificial cloud machine,"
Jerzy said. "Kneel by the tub,
put your hand on it & close your eyes,
think of something & only that thing.
Turn the handle."

Jerzy dumped a bucket of boiling water into the tub,
sprinkled powder from an unmarked jar:

out from the pipe shot a small cloud,
a small cloud in the shape of a train.

Simon watched it drift away,
excess steam collecting into tracks.

They did it again.
The more water, the bigger the cloud:

a train so big Simon climbed inside of it,
at home in the promise of that fragile white.
The smoke took on the shapes of passengers,
silent ghosts on a silent rail.

Simon ran for the conductor's car,
but a gust of wind scattered the train.

He grabbed at the thinning pieces,
opened his hand—
found the lines that had always been there.

EASTER SUNDAY TORNADO, 1913

Rain threatened the morning service,
sky swelling black into afternoon.

The winds collected,
dropped a charcoal funnel to the ground
that tore up the path
along Little Papillion Creek
into the west side of the city,
five blocks wide
when it hit Dewey Avenue.

A bird wrapped its feet
around a telephone wire, hung
upside down & got sucked into the spinning
with a streetcar & church roof:

casualties in the sky.

The same storm spawned
another tornado in Indiana,
a torrent of dust over Topeka,
flooded the Midwest & upstate New York.

When it was all over,
the people who still had homes
came out of them,
started the search for the missing,
found nothing but dust,
shattered pieces of lumber
piercing steel train cars.

& then the cold front came,
three feet of snow hiding the damage.

Simon started working at the store with Jerzy.

Their first project together:
A Miniature Tree Maker,
a machine modeled
after a wood chipper
that did the opposite:

One end they stuffed with branches & leaves,
then added heat & a special glue
made from tree sap & boiled horse bones
to mold all of the pieces together
into the shape of a bonsai-sized tree
that popped out on the other side of the conveyor belt.

The first trees looked like something a child would draw
but soon they really figured it out—
you could not mix too many different trees.

It became Simon's job to collect leafy twigs,
separate them by species. They kept it simple,
using only the needles & bark of Blue Spruce
until they could make a perfect model
of its wild counterpart.

Once they had the process down,
they moved on to Gambel Oak & Three-Flowered Maples,
tried their luck with fruit-bearing trees,
made small apples,
clumps of elderberry & pears.

They put the trees in the store
just for decoration
but people started asking
how much do they cost?
& soon they sold faster than they could be made.

Simon ran the machine all day
& some nights Jerzy never left its side,
filling special orders for Hawthorns & Buckeye,
Pagoda Dogwood, Saucer Magnolias.

Simon delivered the trees by bike,
some nights riding all over town,
streetlamps throwing his shadow large onto buildings,

the load lighter with every stop,
Simon moving faster & faster
with every tree that came out of the basket,
faster & faster until they were gone
& he could not stop his feet blurring circles
on the sides of the bike
as he raced through the city
chasing the whistle of a nearby train
the clack-*clack* clack-*clack* clack-*clack*
of its wheels, working his bike chain
to make the same sound, chasing
something he could not catch,
chasing that feeling of moving so fast
knowing nothing can stop you.

It was never quite the same.

When summer kicked down the door,
Omaha caved.

Simon hit the switch
on a white box fan & up
flew one of Jerzy's drawings:
backpack with flames
shooting from the bottom,
blueprint of a man
suspended in air,
a lost idea buried in a pile,
an idea abandoned years before.

Simon drew himself delivering trees
through the sky, flying
alongside the shapes of clouds.

While the two of them molded
pieces of metal, Jerzy spoke of
the meatpacking magnate
whose son was kidnapped in 1900:

Eddie Cudahy Jr. was sixteen,
running an errand in Old Gold Coast
when a hand on his shoulder
pulled him into a darkness.

His picture ran with the morning headlines
in the *Omaha Bee* & *Daily News*.

Cudahy Sr. closed his plant,
all his competitors doing the same,
sending their workers to look,
seven thousand men pulling back the city's sheets.

At 9:00 am a voice on the line
told Cudahy Sr. to search his yard
for a ransom note that promised
to blind the boy with acid
if he did not give up twenty five thousand.

Cudahy followed the paved road
to Fremont, left the money by a burning lantern
& turned around.

For him, the money
was like dropping a nickel
down a cellar grating.

The worst part was the wait,
the pacing & sweat until the boy came back safely,
no scratches on him,
not even a new smell.

The lead suspect was Pat Crowe,
the butcher who disappeared five years earlier
captured in Montana,
put on trial but found not guilty.

"At least that's how I remember it," Jerzy said.

"So what became of Eddie Jr.?" Simon asked.

Jerzy didn't know.

They worked through July
trying to perfect the initial design,
the pack that would put a man in the air.

It took four tries to get the math of it right,
the first one too heavy,
the others unable to sustain power.

Simon tested the latest model
on a Thursday in Jerzy's backyard,
strapped himself in & fired it up,
rose above the phone wires
spinning in circles,
scaring off blackbirds.

Steadying himself, he could see
the city trailed off like an unfinished drawing,
its buildings shrinking into level dirt.

Jerzy ran the yard
screaming "It's working!"
Simon burned smoke trails
in a temporary sky,
pulling parallel with the falling sun.

Coming back down, the power sputtered,
Simon dropped, crashing in a heap of metal & dust.

Jerzy carried him upstairs,
made him a sling from an old dishcloth,
padded his scrapes with cotton & alcohol,
gave him something for the pain.

Simon woke up alone, numb.
He got up from the couch to shake off the fog,

went looking for the bathroom,
found a picture on a hallway table—
a younger Jerzy with a beautiful woman,
her hair long & her smile wide.

Under the frame an old newspaper opened
to a picture of the same woman.
Simon held the curling edge.
He read the details:

…..*died in labor*……..*terrible heat wave*…

……..*survived by husband*…….

…*child did not make it*……..

The page was filled with others like her.
Simon turned it, saw his own name
stuck in ink below a picture of a baby,
the headline bold, knocking him back:

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THE ONLY LIVING BOY IN OMAHA

One of 14 newborns originally pronounced dead at St. Joseph's Hospital on Thursday is now in stable condition, in what doctors are calling a "miracle birth."

Simon—last name unknown—was delivered during a blackout at the hospital that claimed 27 lives, including the child's mother's. The boy stopped breathing shortly after his birth and when doctors' efforts to resuscitate him failed, he was pronounced dead.

But when the boy's father—who could not be reached for comment—was given the chance to say goodbye to the apparently lifeless boy, he found himself instead saying hello to his new son.

According to nurses present at the scene, Simon's father was in the room holding his lifeless boy for close to 20 minutes when he suddenly ran into the hallway screaming "He's moving!" Doctors rushed to the infant and discovered that he was again displaying signs of life.

"It's like nothing I've ever seen," said Catherine Hayward, a nurse at St. Joseph's for over 30 years. "One minute he was gone and the next he was smiling."

The boy's condition steadily improved over the next 24 hours, and doctors have since found no complications with his health, making him the only newborn to survive Thursday's tragedy.

After a meeting with his father's old boss,
Simon was back on a train in a week
collecting tickets for a two-day trip,
greeting passengers
with a phrase his father used
thousands of times:
"Welcome to paradise."

Pulling out of Omaha,
radio draped in sunlight, whistle
tearing a hole in the blue,
Simon found a home in between the two sounds.

Gathering speed, he found it impossible to blink,
eyes darting from colored buttons to track,
& then, a settling.

He watched Nebraska vanish
in a wheat-yellow blur,
tried to burn the distance of a field into memory.

As he climbed into Colorado,
a feeling of flying back into the air.

He unwrapped his last bandage
to reveal a small scar,
washed it white
at the station in Denver
& for the first time
really noticed the waiting faces,
could see it in the eyes—
who was leaving & who was going home.

There seemed to be less than he ever remembered;
still he felt responsible for all of them.

At a newsstand
Simon bought two postcards:
one with a picture of an Aspen chairlift
caught among snow covered pine,
the other a painting,
Fisher's Peak: small town
in shadow of the sky-splitting rock,
green hills goosebumps on the land.

On the back of the first he wrote:
Good luck getting your feet off the ground

& on the other,
I'm sorry.

He stuffed them both
in his pocket, left Denver
to shrink in the rear vision mirror,
the light going with it.

Somewhere on the cusp
of New Mexico, Simon took
the postcards back out,
studied the pictures
& then held them out the window.
They curled around his fingers
before he let them go,

one soaked in moonlight,
the other a pebble
in the night's steady fist.

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Simon stepped down from a train in Arizona,
the air like something he could climb inside of.

He walked out into open desert,
heat rising in slivers
off the red dirt, another world
leaking through the pale blue familiar.

In the undisturbed sky,
he could see its different hues,
the darkening layers.

He watched a bird picking
at the leg of a dead coyote,
tried to block the sun from his eyes
& turned to look at a distant cactus.

Squinting he saw
it wasn't a cactus at all,
but a woman wearing a hospital gown,
soaked in sweat with a hand on her stomach.

Simon started sprinting toward her,
blood rushing to his ears, a trail of dust
kicked up behind him, ribcage
feeling the press of lungs. He flew

face first into the dirt after tripping
on a yucca stump. He looked all around
but the woman was gone,
into the heat like evaporated water.

He rubbed his eyes & looked again
but he was alone in the middle of nothing—

Just him, the dirt, a bird, & a leg bone,
the sound of the train calling him back.

Just a bridge away from San Francisco,
the brakeman slowed the train to a stop.

Simon was scheduled to start back in the morning,
to stalk the smoke trail of his last two days.

He checked his watch
as the last passenger dragged
luggage onto the platform,
sat down in the observation car,
watched the sky go orange,
purple, black, city lights
blinking their distant signals.

Simon walked the length of the empty train,
checking each car for things left behind,
found a half dozen newspapers
& three empty cups,
a woman's sweater, a pocket knife.

For a moment he stopped, closed his eyes,
knew he'd never hear a silence like that again.